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Canadian utopia in Poland: How L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* contributed to Polish Solidarity

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Abstract

L. M. Montgomery's 1908 novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, about a young, socially-awkward Nova Scotian girl adopted by a family in Prince Edward Island, a novel that expresses the sentiments of the North American "New Woman" movement and markedly exhibits post-colonialist imperialism, has produced a young heroine who stands in solidarity with civil resistance in occupied Poland. Given that Montgomery was descendent of the white English/Scottish Protestant invader culture on PEI, complicit in the marginalization and deportation of French settlers and in the annihilation (literally and metaphorically) of the indigenous Mi'kmaq, the idealistic transformation of Montgomery's famous Anne character into a symbol of political defiance seems, to me, incredible. In this article, I illustrate the utopic vision that Montgomery, and indeed Anne herself, create on Prince Edward Island and examine how that isolated, island utopia, and Anne become transfixed into heroic visions in war-time Poland.

Key words

utopia, Canada, children's literature, Poland

Kanadyjska utopia w Polsce: Co *Ania z Zielonego Wzgórza* L. M. Montgomery wniosła do polskiej solidarności

Abstrakt

Powieść L. M. Montgomery z 1908 roku pt. *Ania z Zielonego Wzgórza* o małej krnąbrnej dziewczynce z Nowej Szkocji, adoptowanej przez rodzinę z Wyspy Księcia Edwarda – powieść, która wyraża sentymenty północnoamerykańskiego ruchu na rzecz „nowej kobiety" i uwypukla postkolonialistyczny imperializm – wykreowała młodziutką bohaterkę istotną z punktu widzenia ruchu oporu w okupowanej Polsce. Biorąc pod uwagę, że Montgomery była spadkobierczynią białej, angielskiej/szkockiej, protestanckiej kultury najeźdźców na Wyspę Księcia Edwarda, współodpowiedzialnej za marginalizację i deportację francuskich osadników oraz anihilację (dosłowną i w przenośni) natywnego plemienia Mi'kmaq, idealistyczna transformacja słynnej postaci Ani stworzonej przez Montgomery w symbol politycznego oporu wydaje mi się niewiarygodna. W artykule, pokazuję utopijną wizję, którą Montgomery, a w istocie sama Ania, kreują na Wyspie Księcia Edwarda oraz analizuję, jak ta odizolowana, wyspiarska utopia oraz Ania przemieniają się w heroiczne wizje w Polsce w czasach wojny i okupacji.

Słowa kluczowe

utopia, Kanada, literatura dziecięca, Polska

According to the Government of Prince Edward Island's "Island Information" webpage (2017), "In Poland, [L. M.] Montgomery was something of a hero in war time and later, becoming part of a thriving black-market trade for the Polish resistance". Carrell (2003: 370) adds that "[d]uring World War II, copies [of *Anne of Green Gables*] were issued to Polish troops". Further, Chilewska (2009: 112) indicates that the novel, first translated into Polish a mere six months after its original 1908 English publication, "enjoyed longevity in Polish translations and has become part of Poland's literary canon of children's literature"

as required reading for Polish children in Grade IV. Remarkably, *Anne of Green Gables*, a novel set in the tiniest Canadian province, a novel about a strange Nova Scotian orphan girl, a novel that expresses the progressive sentiments of the North American "New Woman" movement while it staunchly reinforces British post-colonial imperialism, stands in solidarity with civil resistance in occupied 1940s Poland. As an Islander who, as a child, was over-exposed to all things Anne, and as a French Acadian who recognizes Montgomery's overt racism, I find this Polish connection surprising. Given that Montgomery and her family were part of the white English/Scottish invader culture on Prince Edward Island, complicit in the marginalization and deportation of Acadian settler-invaders in 1758, and in the near annihilation (literally and, in the novel, metaphorically) of the indigenous Mi'kmaq, the transformation of Montgomery's persona, her literary endeavours, her famous Anne Shirley, and Prince Edward Island into symbols of political defiance seems, to me, unbelievable and, in fact, insulting.

Various academic positions on *Anne of Green Gable*'s popularity have, as Staten (2010: 167) notes, "not been entirely resolved". However, when I consider the profound impact that the novel has had in Canada and around the world, particularly in Japan and Poland, my reservations yield to the positive aspects that Montgomery, the novel, and Anne illuminate, not only in the literary realm, but as part of Canada's self-representation as a global peace-keeper, political ally, and cultural melting pot. The fictional Canadian utopia of the novel becomes, for the reader, a potential reality – a pastoral landscape that comes to life both as a fictive space of freedom and escapism, as an imaginative island gardenscape, and as a real geographical location far from any battlegrounds. It becomes a safe haven that, in the readers' consciousness, actually exists in an exotic location hidden from the rest of the world. The idealization of Prince Edward Island, and its fictional and imaginary counterparts, in combination with the orphan pathos of early twentieth-century children's literature and Anne's

unlimited imaginative power, allow this Canadian utopia to function as a mindspace within which one can withstand displacement, social and political oppression, and national and personal despair. In addition, this argument for Montgomery's utopian vision of Prince Edward Island, and how that isolated island utopia and indeed Anne herself become transfixed into heroic visions in war-time Poland also involves how the Polish translations of the novel affect its reception.

However, I must first consider some of the disconcerting aspects of a nostalgic novel written by a British post-colonialist and set on an island that was aggressively depopulated twice. For me, the most problematic facet of Montgomery's novel is its consistent dehumanization of the Acadians and the obliteration of the Mi'kmaw First Nation on Prince Edward Island. The aboriginal peoples, who called the island Epekwitk, meaning "cradled by the ocean" (Island 2017), established their communities across the island at least one thousand years pre-Columbus. Since the 1573 arrival of Jacques Cartier, French settler-invaders – who may themselves have been deported from France – arrived (calling themselves Acadians), renaming the place Île Saint Jean and displacing the Mi'kmaq to limited designated regions of the island. British authorities forcibly deported the Acadians from the island and the remainder of the Canadian Maritimes (the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia) in 1758. However, significant populations of Mi'kmaq and Acadians evaded exportation and remained, as unwelcome outsiders – illegal aliens – left to survive on the least agriculturally profitable areas of the island, the literal peripheries of PEI – the swamps and the coastal fishing villages. Because their tenuous relationship with the British continued well into the Canadian confederacy of 1867, both populations remained Othered well into the twentieth century, and, to some extent, this continues today. As Geissler and Cecil (2005: 199) have noted, "The absence of the Other – the Acadians and the Mi'kmaq – in Montgomery's writing reaffirms an established and authoritative British post-colonial presence on the real and the fictional PEI". Although this post-

colonial context is evident within eastern Canada, it is largely unrealized in western Canada and throughout the world – the marginalized peoples are invisible to outsiders.

Some critics justify Montgomery's post-colonialist attitude by commenting that the Mi'kmaq and Acadians were politically and culturally marginalized because of Canada's status as a British commonwealth country, lesser-peoples living on the island illegally, and because Montgomery's own family settled the Cavendish area (Montgomery's fictional Avonlea) – prime farmland surrounded by breathtaking beaches – for the Empire. Jones (2013: 133) writes, "[I]n the historical and social context in which [Montgomery] was writing, class and social standing had much to do with […] the 'naturally' established order". In other words, the suppression of the Other was part of Montgomery's British post-colonial upbringing in Cavendish. Consequently, Montgomery "constructs Anne's personal society as a set of concentric circles of [British] kinship", as Geissler and Cecil (2005: 198) have argued. Those who are most like Anne are "Kindred Spirits"; the more unlike Anne, the further away they are kept, just as the Acadians and Mi'kmaq were kept at a geographical and legal distance.

Nevertheless, one might have hoped that a novel that ostensibly represents a Canadian ideal or hero would be more inclusive, resisting the exclusionist *status quo.* But there is no place – that is, literally, utopia – for the Other on Montgomery's Prince Edward Island. Sadly, there is no mention of the Mi'kmaq in the novel, and every reference to an Acadian is a racial slur. For example, when discussing the adoption of a boy to help on the farm, Marilla Cuthbert (Anne's adoptive mother) avers, "There's never anybody to be had but those stupid, half-grown little French boys" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 14). In the same passage, Marilla suggests that an Acadian boy is not a *real* Canadian. She says, "Give me a *native* born at least […] I'll feel easier in my mind and sleep sounder at nights if we get a born *Canadian*" (my emphasis; Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 14). Ignorant of her prejudices, Marilla uses the words "native" and "Canadian" to exclude both the Mi'kmaq and the Acadians who are non-British, but, in

fact, born in Canada. British Canadians are the only real Canadians in Montgomery's PEI and in Anne's Avonlea. Since the Other is emphatically excluded, all perspectives in the novel, filtered through Montgomery's post-colonial lens, are those of British-Canadians and the reader is presented with a British-Canadian island colony – different from, but loyal to, its mother island. Hyphenated national identities (of all kinds) persist throughout Canada even now. Furthermore, through Anne's recolonization and Islanders' capitalistic exploitation of the novel, PEI has been robbed of its beauty, bounty, and multiculturalism.

Interestingly, Chilewska (2009: 198) indicates that a 1912 Polish translation of the novel softens Montgomery's racism. Originally, when Marilla tells Anne to throw away her anodyne-tainted cake, she says, "It isn't fit for any human to eat, not even Jerry Buote" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 178), their Acadian farm hand, who, in Marilla's mind is sub-human. The Polish version reads, "No human could swallow it" (Chilewska 2009: 198), removing the racial slur, not necessarily to purge racism from the novel, but more likely to remove a reference that would not be understood by a Polish reader with no historical knowledge about the real Prince Edward Island.

Another significant difficulty of the novel is Montgomery's failure to, or lack of interest in, subverting the Island's British post-colonial social structure. Every citizen of Anne's community is a Presbyterian whose station in life is fixed according to a British, God-fearing society. Everyone – that is, everyone of British descent – has a specific place and function in Avonlea and participates in communal activities with a shared cultural and religious background. Initially, Anne, whose spiritual, educational, and social development has been neglected by a series of uncaring foster parents in Nova Scotia, does not fit in, as exemplified by her peculiar behaviour, shabby appearance, and physical smallness. When Matthew Cuthbert (Anne's adoptive father) arrives at the train station to pick up Anne, Montgomery (2003 [1908]: 23) writes, "[T]he freckled witch was very different". I must point out that by "witch" Montgomery means someone who is bewitching, as Anne has certainly

charmed Matthew (who himself is considered odd in Avonlea) with her unusually bright spirit. Whitaker (1992: 12) suggests, "It is the queerness of Anne Shirley, both in physical appearance […] and character […] that catches the eye and ear of Avonlea and of the reader". In other words, it is Anne's lack of British Presbyterian upbringing that illuminates her difference from the Avonlea townspeople. Thus, I would argue that Montgomery's (2003 [1908]: 23) descriptor "very different" reflects Anne's Otherness that must be socialized out of her, or she will be left on the outside just as the solitary Matthew is. Indeed, Montgomery (2003 [1908]: 57) writes that on Anne's second night at Green Gables, "Marilla decided that Anne's religious training must begin at once. Plainly there was no time to be lost". Anne's indoctrination into the post-colonial Christian ideology in Avonlea is not only required, but urgent.

Despite Anne's initial strangeness – her dissimilarity to Avonlea folk – Montgomery qualifies her pathetic waif's description with an important caveat: "our discerning extraordinary observer might have concluded that no commonplace soul inhabited the body of this stray" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 19). Although dubious of Anne's upbringing so far, Marilla recognizes Anne's inherent goodness and likeness to the British post-colonialists in Avonlea, proven by the fact that Anne's deceased parents were good, British Nova Scotians. Indeed, Montgomery allows Anne to go as far as the cultural limitations imposed on an Island woman at the beginning of the twentieth-century *can* go. Anne, whose outspokenness must be reined in to meet Avonlea social approval, is intelligent and emotionally strong, and is essentially a good Christian. As an adult, she becomes the epitome of the North American "New Woman" – a post-colonial construction – marrying, having children, becoming a teacher, and independently deciding to delay her education to help Marilla, whose vision is deteriorating. But it is only because she is a British-born Canadian and from a Christian family, and because she readily conforms to Avonlea's rules – because she yearns to belong to *anyone* – that Anne has the potential to be reformed into a good person by Marilla's rigid post-colonial Presbyterian

standards (standards that, in Montgomery's world, simultaneously exclude the Mi'kmaq and Acadians). Marilla tells Anne that she must "try to be a good little girl and show [her]self as grateful" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 61), as if the poor child was herself responsible for her desperate situation and ought to be thankful that a Christian British-Canadian has taken her in. In the Polish translations, Anne's development along Marilla's determined course is appropriate in a different context, because, as Chilewska (2009: 198) indicates, the novel "is about a kind, intelligent, hard-working girl who takes pleasure in helping others and in bettering herself by means of education". Anne sets a good Christian example – Catholicized in Poland. However, Marilla's harsh character, the result perhaps of her romantic bitterness or the lack of experience with children, is softened by Polish translators. Chilewska (2009: 198) writes, "The portrayal of [Anne's] guardians is manipulated […] to show them as good people, in fact, as better people than they are in Montgomery's book". Their kindness is one of more than the mere Christian duty Marilla stoically hides behind in her decision to keep Anne.

What these two troubling features of the novel amount to is the misrepresentation of PEI and of Canadian culture. Factually, a significant portion of Canada was of British descent in 1908; however, PEI has a unique multicultural identity that is at once Canadian and specifically Island. Geissler and Cecil (2006: 196) contend that "Montgomery's virtual exclusion and dismissal of Acadian and Mi'kmaw Islanders has compounded the creation of a false and biased representation of the island". Further, the popularity of the novel has "perpetuated the creation of a false cultural memory […] [a skewed] international perception of Canadian identity" (Geissler and Cecil 2006: 200) as homogenously British. Perhaps, however, the misrepresentation of the real PEI is unimportant in the context of Polish acceptance of Anne as a hero and of her island as a utopia. For the novel need not be read as applying to an actual location any more than Anne Shirley be seen as an actual person (although her legendary status often makes her seem so). As a reader living in India, Gilmore (2005: 37) illustrates this

point stating, "For the longest time I didn't realize that the books were set in a place that was real". And although Europeans recognize Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver as "Canada", I suspect that the existence of Prince Edward Island, because of its small size and almost hidden location (in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence), is less well known, even in 2017. The Avonlea of *Anne of Green Gables* can still maintain its utopian guise as a beautiful island no place in which one finds safety and security.

Consequently, as both a classic of Canadian literature and of children's literature, *Anne of Green Gables* has remained attractive to readers for more than a hundred years, across the globe, spawning numerous critical analyses of its appeal. As a poetic example of early twentieth-century fiction for young girls, Montgomery's novel makes the most of the conventional and changing attributes of the genre, while taking her text in a new generic direction. Chilewska (2009: 43) explains that popular nineteenth-century children's novels (think now of Charles Dickens) "presented dying youth, tortured existence and children who exemplified all that is noble and good". Such texts were highly, and overtly, didactic. By the beginning of the twentieth century, children were being represented differently by novelists, as individuals capable of expressing positive and negative feelings and ideas (Chilewska 2009: 43). Montgomery contributes to this literary shift in her novel. When Anne is physically distanced from the abuse she experienced in Nova Scotia, and is safe and secure at Green Gables, where she imaginatively explores the landscape and takes her place in the close-knit prosperous community, she is able to verbalize the former Dickensian life she led as an orphan. As Anne laments her rejection by Marilla, Montgomery (2003 [1908]: 52) describes her wan face as showing "the misery of a helpless little creature who finds itself once more caught in the trap from which it had just escaped". Sympathetically, Marilla concludes, "What a starved, unloved life [Anne] had had – a life of drudgery and poverty and neglect" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 48). This is the turning point in Anne's life because Marilla's pity (and presumably the readers' as well) makes her respond

as a Christian woman should, and she decides to keep Anne at Green Gables. Marilla's decision (arguably) frees Anne from further oppression and abuse as an unwanted orphan, and allows her to develop into a strong, independent woman, albeit one who remains within the limits of British post-colonial and Christian respectability. Marilla's empathy following Anne's tragic orphan narrative surely makes *Anne of Green Gables* an emotionally appealing novel that reminds readers of their moral responsibility to others.

Unlike my interpretation of Montgomery's writing as literary (partial) racial purification of PEI, Devereux (2001: 21) claims that Montgomery's decision "to keep 'other racial origins' [...] *out* of the main narrative and at the margins" allows the novel to "mov[e] across cultural boundaries, becoming, in the process, a figure on other nations' iconography" (Devereaux 2001: 28). Clement (2011) agrees, stating that "readers must embrace the opportunity to be empowered by their own identity". Indeed, this is what Anne does to survive her dismal life in Nova Scotia: she embraces an imagined powerful identity. Yet she is completely assimilated into the post-colonial ideology she has the power to supersede. Nevertheless, the lack of cultural specificity typical of a fictive utopian island allows readers to either accept that lack as an open, non-appropriated landscape, or as a place onto which their own experiences and desires can be transferred. Given the degree to which Montgomery, through Anne, describes the nature of Cavendish, as Avonlea, it is easy to envision it as a potential Garden of Eden into which any good Christian may enter. Nodelman (1992: 33) suggests, "Such a place offers the pleasures of nature without its wild savagery, and the pleasures of civilization without its urban constrictions". This safe, natural island – which now has been corrupted by Anne-ification – is the epitome of PEI's landscape in Montgomery's time.

However, Nodelman's (1992: 37) suggestion that Anne's development and her ability to remind adults of their youthful happiness moves Avonlea towards "a regressive world of perfect childlike innocence" is incorrect. Neither Anne nor her island are regressive or innocent. For several residents of

Avonlea, including Marilla, Anne assists in working past bitter memories and disappointed dreams toward a contentment in the present, almost serving as a sympathetic psychotherapist. Anne also encourages everyone to enjoy the simple pleasures that exist in nature on the lush green and red island surrounded by sparkling blue gulf waters, pleasures that are renewed daily when one takes the time to notice them. As Anne comments on her first sight of "The Avenue" leading to Green Gables, it is "the first thing I ever saw that couldn't be improved upon by imagination" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 25). The beauty of the tiny isolated island fits in with Avonlea's British Christian ideology; nature, this *particular* nature, is God's finest work. As an Islander, I must agree.

But this utopia does not regress to childlike innocence. Montgomery forces her characters, especially the young but knowledgeable Anne, to recognize the harshest realities in life: even for a child, a good person, a Christian, a British-Canadian, poverty, loneliness, oppression, abuse, and tragedy are part of life. Anne repeatedly bemoans the fact that in her short eleven years, many people have rejected her, and when she arrives at Green Gables she knowingly exclaims to Marilla, "You don't want me!" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 30). Indeed, it is Anne's awareness of her horrific past and potentially terrible future that results in her most peculiar (to the people of Avonlea) yet endearing and vital character trait: her effective and prolific use of imagination. Weiss-Townsend (1992: 111) explains that Anne's "use of imagination to make her world a better one may be described quite literally as wish-fulfilling fantasy, but it is a real power, precisely because Anne controls it […] [to] help her to cope with the world as it is given to her […] a power for the powerless". Furthermore, what Avonlea residents consider as bizarre behaviour is crucial to Anne's emotional survival. Czerny (2010: 150) writes, "The 'lunacy' that informs *Anne of Green Gables* is linked to expressions of emotional loss, where Anne, as a rejected orphan, possesses an 'imaginative substance' that sends up imitations and captures, through an attentive readiness, strength, and lightheartedness through non-human communication". What the

conservative, no-nonsense Avonlea community cannot recognize is that Anne holds the key to her own emotional and personal success through her imaginative ability – an escape from the realities that threaten not only her happiness, but her very existence.

Readers, however, can understand, as Epperly (2013: 35) does, that through Anne, Montgomery is "teaching us about creativity itself and about possibilities for the human spirit". Imagination, creativity, and art are important pieces of humanity's enduring condition. And, as Suchacka *et al.* (2014: 223) remark, "In Poland, the need to adopt such a strategy of survival" can be found in Anne's capacity for imaginative escapism and self-nurturing and in her way of envisioning her environment as a utopian landscape. Carrell (2003: 307) confirms that "During World War II, copies [of the novel] were issued to Polish troops at the battlefront, in an attempt to sharpen in their minds poignant images of the homes and families they were fighting for". In other words, the novel was to inspire soldiers to *imagine* returning home to a peaceful existence, for as Anne asserts, "[W]hen you *are* imagining, you might as well imagine something worth while" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 21). Indeed, as Epperly (2013: 35) notes, Montgomery "taught millions how to create better pictures for themselves, pictures of a world they would like to live in and help to flourish". And that is how Anne Shirley, *Anne of Green Gables*, and L. M. Montgomery contribute to Polish resistance: by elevating the universal human spirit and supplying a fictive escape on a Canadian island utopia with a magical imaginative presence in the form of a tiny female waif.

Thus, despite my initial disbelief in *Anne of Green Gables* to engage the Polish reader in a time of unspeakable despair, because of Montgomery's blatant, and to me, offensive, exclusion of the Mi'kmaq and Acadians on Prince Edward Island, I concede that even without an accurate representation of PEI, the novel does present a utopian vision of peace and freedom in a tamed, yet charmed, natural landscape. The lack of multicultural specificity and the translators' Polish cultural modifications make the novel accessible, enjoyable, and meaningful

beyond its Canadian and Island contexts. Most importantly, the character of Anne Shirley, the strange little orphan invader, provides the much needed coping strategy for the downtrodden that must have brought some glimmer of escapism or hopefulness to those struggling for their own survival, to see a possible "bend in the road" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 299) as Anne herself does when she realizes, at the end of the novel, that she has become a capable young woman whose imaginative powers helped her navigate the worst times of her life. Accepting her place in Avonlea, with her own imaginative utopian island available to her whenever she needs it, Anne concludes, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world" (Montgomery 2003 [1908]: 306).

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